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THE REGION

'Compass' Points to New Direction for Growth

Regional plan offers fewer suburbs, more high-density housing on transit lines

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The plan is named "compass" because it is intended to direct Southern California's growth for the next 25 years.

Under the proposal, more than 100 clusters of high-density development would be built along the region's transit corridors, neighborhoods would become more pedestrian friendly and more employers would locate near where people live.

While some hailed the "compass" plan by the Southern California Assn. of Governments as a visionary approach to solving the region's traffic and housing woes, others predicted implementing it would be an uphill battle.

The sweeping blueprint, which SCAG officials unveiled last week, was unanimously adopted by the agency's regional council of more than 50 elected officials.

But decisions about implementing specific projects would be made by individual city councils.

Even if a city's SCAG representative agrees in concept with high-density development for the region, positions can shift once politicians start courting voters back home.

"Most cities do everything they can to decrease density. They hit developers over the head," said Montclair Councilman Bill Ruh. "You'll hear people say, 'This is a fine plan, but it's not appropriate for my community ... not in my backyard.' "

In a 100-page report, SCAG outlines the need for the plan: The region's population is projected to grow by 6.3 million, to 22.9 million, by 2030, with most of the increase coming from births by families already here. If the region stays on its current course, traffic congestion in some areas would more than triple, air quality would worsen, the cost of transporting goods would increase and the region's economy would suffer, SCAG officials say.

Academics and urban planners say a key way to improve mobility in a metropolitan area is to integrate

transportation with land-use planning — a central element in SCAG's effort.

But they also note that benefits typically come only after significant effort. Zoning laws often must change city by city, and substantial investment by private developers would have to be made project by project.

Although SCAG officials say the plan would alter only 2% of the region's streetscape, that would still be too much for some to bear.

"The public is not going to stand for high-density tenements," said Gerald A. Silver, president of Homeowners of Encino, echoing the view of many community leaders and antigrowth activists. SCAG officials "can lead a horse to water, but they can't get it to drink."

But officials at SCAG — a planning consortium for Los Angeles, Orange, Ventura, Riverside, San Bernardino and Imperial counties — say public sentiment may be shifting.

With the region's sky-high real estate prices, many new buyers can afford only condos. The Southland's traffic congestion — the worst in the nation — has also made people reconsider suburban living, when it means several hours of daily freeway commuting.

"I think that resistance [to high-density development] will be less and less over time," said Mark Pisano, executive director of SCAG.

"The market is moving in this direction."

SCAG planners view all subway, light-rail and Metrolink stations as potential sites for new mixed-use development. The plan also would encourage so-called "infill" development — building housing on scattered sites in already urbanized areas.

Such trends are already occurring in Los Angeles, where the city and the Metropolitan Transportation Authority have been working on developing mixed-use sites within walking distance of Metro Red Line subway stations.

"You can either plan for growth or not plan for growth. It's going to happen anyway," said Los Angeles City Councilman Eric Garcetti. "SCAG is our envisioning body. It sets a bar as to where we should be."

A few cities — notably Santa Monica and Pasadena — have already undertaken such high-density development, and others are taking note of their success.

Covina is redeveloping its downtown with new housing alongside or above restaurants and shops.

"We like it. It melds well with the community, and it makes for a more commuter-friendly environment," said Covina Mayor Kevin Stapleton.

In a way, cities such as Covina are simply returning to tradition. Long before tracts of single-family homes sprang up across the Southland in the 1950s and 1960s, cities had mixed-use, pedestrian-friendly downtowns, and many people relied on transit.

In the coming year, Covina expects to add more than 100 housing units downtown, including 82 lofts near a Metrolink station. The city is also considering changing zoning laws — which limit downtown development to 22 units an acre — making it up to 50% higher, Stapleton said.

Using Covina as an example, SCAG officials say, they will work in the next 12 months to persuade other cities to adopt the plan.

"There are some good ideas in the plan. How it gets implemented remains to be seen," said Otto Kroutil, director of development for Ontario. "How do you encourage local communities to make regionally responsible decisions? It's very, very difficult. People are a little leery of losing local control."

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